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AGAMEMNON

A TRAGEDY

TAKEN FROM ÆSCHYLUS.

LONDON:
BERNARD QUARITCH,
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1876.

1st ed.

The edition consists of 250 *copies.*

BERNARD QUARITCH.

PREFACE.

[*This Version—or Per-version—of Æschylus was originally printed to be given away among Friends, who either knew nothing of the Original, or would be disposed to excuse the liberties taken with it by a less worthy hand.*

Such as it is, however, others, whom I do not know, have asked for copies when I had no more copies to give. So Mr. Quaritch ventures on publishing it on his own account, at the risk of facing much less indulgent critics.

I can add little more to the Apology prefixed to the private Edition.]

I SUPPOSE that a literal version of this play, if possible, would scarce be intelligible. Even were the dialogue always clear, the lyric Choruses, which make up so large a part, are so dark and abrupt in themselves, and therefore so much the more mangled and tormented by copyist and commentator, that the most conscientious translator must not only jump at a mean-

ing, but must bridge over a chasm; especially if he determine to complete the antiphony of Strophe and Antistrophe in English verse.

Thus, encumbered with forms which sometimes, I think, hang heavy on Æschylus himself;* struggling with indistinct meanings, obscure allusions, and even with *puns* which some have tried to reproduce in English; this grand play, which to the scholar and the poet, lives, breathes, and moves in the dead language, has hitherto seemed to me to drag and stifle under conscientious translation into the living; that is to say, to have lost that which I think the drama can least afford to lose all the world over. And so it was that, hopeless of succeeding where as good versifiers, and better scholars, seem to me to have failed, I came first to break the bounds of Greek Tragedy; then to swerve from the Master's footsteps; and so, one

* For instance, the long antiphonal dialogue of the Chorus debating what to do—or whether do anything—after hearing their master twice cry out (in pure Iambics also) that he is murdered.

license drawing on another to make all of a piece, arrived at the present anomalous conclusion. If it has succeeded in shaping itself into a distinct, consistent, and animated Whole, through which the reader can follow without halting, and not without accelerating interest from beginning to end, he will perhaps excuse my acknowledged transgressions, unless as well or better satisfied by some more faithful Interpreter, or by one more entitled than myself to make free with the Original.

But to re-create the Tragedy, body and soul, into English, and make the Poet free of the language which reigns over that half of the world never dreamt of in his philosophy, must be reserved — especially the Lyric part—*for* some Poet, worthy of that name, and of congenial Genius with the Greek. Would that every one such would devote himself to one such work! whether by Translation, Paraphrase, or Metaphrase, to use Dryden's definition, whose Alexander's Feast, and

some fragments of whose Plays, indicate that he, perhaps, might have rendered such a service to Æschylus and to us. Or, to go further back in our own Drama, one thinks what Marlowe might have done; himself a translator from the Greek; something akin to Æschylus in his genius; still more in his grandiose, and sometimes *authadostomous* verse; of which some lines relating to this very play fall so little short of Greek, that I shall but shame my own by quoting them before hand;

> "Is this the face that launched a thousand ships,
> And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
> Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss!"

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

—:o:—

AGAMEMNON, *King of Argos.*

CLYTEMNESTRA, *his Queen.*

ÆGISTHUS, *his Cousin.*

CASSANDRA, *Daughter of King* PRIAM.

HERALD.

CHORUS *of ancient Councillors.*

The scene is at ARGOS.



AGAMEMNON.

[AGAMEMNON'S *Palace: a Warder on the Battlements.*]

WARDER.

[Once more, once more, and once again once more]
I crave the Gods' compassion, and release
From this inexorable watch, that now
For one whole year, close as a couching dog,
On Agamemnon's housetop I have kept,
Contemplating the muster of the stars,
And those transplendent Dynasties of Heav'n*
That, as alternately they rise and fall,
Draw Warmth and Winter over mortal man.

* The commentators generally understand these λαμπρους δυνάστας to mean Sun and Moon. Blomfield, I believe, admits they may be the Constellations by which the seasons were anciently marked, as in the case of the Pleiades further on in the Play. The Moon, I suppose, had no part to play in such a computation; and, as for the Sun, the beacon-fire surely implies a night-watch.

Thus, and thus long, I say, at the behest
Of the man-minded Woman who here rules,
Here have I watch'd till yonder mountain-top
Shall kindle with a signal-light from Troy.
And watch'd in vain, coucht on the barren stone,
Night after night, night after night, alone,
Ev'n by a wandering dream unvisited,
To which the terror of my post denies
The customary passage of closed eyes.
From which, when haply nodding, I would scare
Forbidden sleep, or charm long night away
With some old ballad of the good old times,
The foolish song falls presently to tears,
Remembering the glories of this House,
Where all is not as all was wont to be,—
No, nor as should—Alas, these royal walls,
Had they but tongue (as ears and eyes, men say)
Would tell strange stories!—But, for fear they should,
Mine shall be mute as they are. Only this—
And this no treason surely—might I but,
But once more might I, see my lord again
Safe home! But once more look upon his face!
But once more take his hand in mine!—
Hilloa!

The words scarce from my lips.—Have the Gods heard?
Or am I dreaming wide awake? as wide
Awake I am—The Light! The Light! The Light
Long look't for, long despair'd of, on the Height!
Oh more to me than all the stars of night!
More than the Morning-star!—more than the Sun
Who breaks my nightly watch, this rising one
Which tells me that my year-long night is done!
When, shaking off the collar of my watch,
I first to Clytemnestra shall report
Such news as, if indeed a lucky cast
For her and Argos, sure a Main to me!
But grant the Gods, to all! A master-cast,
More than compensating all losses past;
And lighting up our altars with a fire
Of Victory that never shall expire!

[*Exit Warder. Daylight gradually dawns, and enter slowly Chorus.*

CHORUS.

I.

Another rising of the sun
That rolls another year away,
Sees us through the portal dun
Dividing night and day

Like to phantoms from the crypt
Of Morpheus or of Hades slipt,
 Through the sleeping city creeping,
Murmuring an ancient song
Of unvindicated wrong,
Ten year told as ten year long.
Since to revenge the great abuse
 To Themis done by Priam's son,
The Brother-Princes that, co-heir
Of Atreus, share his royal chair.
 And from the authentic hand of Zeus
His delegated sceptre bear,
 Startled Greece with such a cry
For Vengeance as a plunder'd pair
Of Eagles over their aerial lair
Screaming, to whirlpool lash the waves of air.

II.

The Robber, blinded in his own conceit,
 Must needs think Retribution deaf and blind.
 Fool! not to know what tongue was in the wind,
When Tellus shudder'd under flying feet,
 When stricken Ocean under alien wings;

Was there no Phœbus to denounce the flight
From Heav'n? Nor those ten thousand Eyes of Night?
And, were no other eye nor ear of man
Or God awake, yet universal Pan,
For ever watching at the heart of things.
And Zeus, the Warden of domestic Right,
And the perennial sanctity of Kings,
Let loose the Fury who, though late
Retarded in the leash of Fate,
Once loos'd, after the Sinner springs;
Over Ocean's heights and hollows,
Into cave and forest follows,
Into fastest guarded town,
Close on the Sinner's heel insists,
And, turn or baffle as he lists,
Dogs him inexorably down.

III.

Therefore to revenge the debt
To violated Justice due,
Armèd Hellas hand in hand
The iron toils of Ares drew
Over water, over land,

Over such a tract of years;
Draught of blood abroad, of tears
 At home, and unexhausted yet:
All the manhood Greece could muster,
 And her hollow ships enclose;
All that Troy from her capacious
 Bosom pouring forth oppose;
By the ships, beneath the wall,
 And about the sandy plain,
Armour-glancing files advancing,
 Fighting, flying, slaying, slain:
And among them, and above them,
Crested Heroes, twain by twain,
 Lance to lance, and thrust to thrust,
Front erect, and, in a moment,
 One or other roll'd in dust.
Till the better blood of Argos
 Soaking in the Trojan sand,
In her silent half dispeopled
 Cities, more than half unmann'd,
Little more of man to meet
Than the helpless child, or hoary
Spectre of his second childhood,
 Tottering on triple feet,

Like the idle waifs and strays
Blown together from the ways
Up and down the windy street.

IV.

But thus it is; All bides the destin'd Hour;
And Man, albeit with Justice at his side,
Fights in the dark against a secret Power
Not to be conquer'd—and how pacified?

V.

For, before the Navy flush'd
Wing from shore, or lifted oar
To foam the purple brush'd;
While about the altar hush'd
Throng'd the ranks of Greece thick-fold,
Ancient Chalcas in the bleeding
Volume of the Future reading
Evil things foresaw, foretold:
That, to revenge some old disgrace
Befall'n her sylvan train,
Some dumb familiar of the Chace
By Menelaus slain,

The Goddess Artemis would vex
The fleet of Greece with storms and checks:
That Troy should not be reached at all;
Or—as the Gods themselves divide
In Heav'n to either mortal side—
If ever reach'd, should never fall—
Unless at such a loss and cost
As counterpoises Won and Lost.

VI.

The Elder of the Royal Twain
Listen'd in silence, daring not arraign
Ill omen, or rebuke the raven lips:
Then taking up the tangled skein
Of Fate, he pointed to the ships;
He sprang aboard: he gave the sign;
And blazing in his golden arms ahead,
Drew the long Navy in a glittering line
After him like a meteor o'er the main.

VII.

So from Argos forth: and so
O'er the rolling waters they,
Till in the roaring To-and-fro
Of rock-lockt Aulis brought to stay:

There the Goddess had them fast:
With a bitter northern blast
Blew ahead and block'd the way:
Day by day delay; to ship
And tackle damage and decay;
Day by day to Prince and People
Indignation and dismay.
"All the while that in the ribb'd
"Bosom of their vessels cribb'd,
"Tower-crowned Troy above the waters
"Yonder, quaffing from the horn
"Of Plenty, laughing them to scorn"—
So would one to other say;
And man and chief in rage and grief
Fretted and consumed away.

VIII.

Then to Sacrifice anew:
And again within the bleeding
Volume of the Future reading,
Once again the summoned Seer
Evil, Evil, still fore-drew.

Day by day, delay, decay
To ship and tackle, chief and crew:
And but one way—one only way to appease
The Goddess, and the wind of wrath subdue;
One way of cure so worse than the disease,
As, but to hear propound,
The Princes struck their sceptres to the ground.

IX.

After a death-deep pause,
The Lord of man and armament his voice
Lifted into the silence—"Terrible choice!
"To base imprisonment of wind and flood
"Whether consign and sacrifice the band
"Of heroes gathered in my name and cause;
"Or thence redeem them by a daughter's blood—
"A daughter's blood shed by a father's hand;
"Shed by a father's hand, and to atone
"The guilt of One—who, could the God endure
"Propitiation by the Life impure,
"Should wash out her transgression with her own."

X.

But, breaking on that iron multitude,
The Father's cry no kindred echo woke:
And in the sullen silence that ensued
An unrelenting iron answer spoke.

XI.

At last his neck to that unnatural yoke
He bowed: his hand to that unnatural stroke:
With growing purpose, obstinate as the wind
That block'd his fleet, so block'd his better mind,
To all the Father's heart within him blind—
For thus it fares with men; the seed
Of Evil, sown by seeming Need,
Grows, self-infatuation-nurst,
From evil Thought to evil Deed,
Incomprehensible at first,
And to the end of Life accurst.

XII.

And thus, the blood of that one innocent
Weigh'd light against one great accomplishment,

At last—at last—in the meridian blaze
Of Day, with all the Gods in Heaven agaze,
And armèd Greece below—he came to dare—
After due preparation, pomp, and prayer,
He came—the wretched father—came to dare—
 Himself—with sacrificial knife in hand,—
 Before the sacrificial altar stand,
To which—her sweet lips, sweetly wont to sing
 Before him in the banquet-chamber, gagg'd,
Lest one ill word should mar the impious thing;
Her saffron scarf about her fluttering,
 Dumb as an all-but-speaking picture, dragg'd
Through the remorseless soldiery—
 But soft!—
 While I tell the more than oft-
Told Story, best in silence found,
 Incense-breathing fires aloft
Up into the rising fire,
Into which the stars expire,
 Of Morning mingle; and a sound
As of Rumour at the heel
 Of some great tiding gathers ground;
And from portals that disclose
Before a fragrant air that blows

Them open, what great matter, Sirs,
Thus early Clytemnestra stirs,
Hither through the palace gate
Torch in hand, and step-elate,
Advancing, with the kindled Eyes
As of triumphant Sacrifice?

CLYTEMNESTRA: CHORUS.

Oh, Clytemnestra, my obeisance
Salutes your coming footstep, as her right
Who rightly occupies the fellow-chair
Of that now ten years widow'd of its Lord.
But—be it at your pleasure ask'd, as answered—
What great occasion, almost ere Night's self
Rekindles into Morning from the Sun,
Has woke your Altar-fire to Sacrifice?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Oh, never yet did Night—
Night of all Good the Mother, as men say,
Conceive a fairer issue than To-day!
Prepare your ear, Old man, for tidings such
As youthful hope would scarce anticipate.

CHORUS.

I have prepared them for such news as such
Preamble argues.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

What if you be told—
Oh mighty sum in one small figure cast!—
That ten-year-toil'd-for Troy is ours at last?

CHORUS.

"If told!"—Once more!—the word escap'd our ears,
With many a baffled rumour heretofore
Slipt down the wind of wasted Expectation.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Once more then; and with unconditional
Assurance having hit the mark indeed
That Rumour aimed at—Troy, with all the towers
Our burning vengeance leaves aloft, is ours.
Now speak I plainly?

CHORUS.

Oh! to make the tears,
That waited to bear witness in the eye,
Start, to convict our incredulity!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Oh blest conviction that enriches you
That lose the cause with all the victory.

CHORUS.

Ev'n so. But how yourself convinced before?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

By no less sure a witness than the God.

CHORUS.

What, in a dream?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

I am not one to trust
The vacillating witnesses of Sleep.

CHORUS.

Aye—but as surely undeluded by
The waking Will, that what we strongly *would*
Imaginates?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Aye, like a doating girl.

CHORUS.

Oh, Clytemnestra, pardon mere Old Age
That, after so long starving upon Hope,
But slowly brooks his own Accomplishment.
The Ten-year war is done then! Troy is taken!
The Gods have told you, and the Gods tell true—
But—how? and when?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Ev'n with the very birth
Of the good Night which mothers this best Day.

CHORUS.

To-day! To-night! but of Night's work in Troy
Who should inform the scarcely open'd ear
Of Morn in Argos?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Hephaistos, the lame God,
And spriteliest of mortal messengers;
Who, springing from the bed of burning Troy,
Hither, by fore-devis'd Intelligence
Agreed upon between my Lord and me,
Posted from dedicated Height to Height

The reach of land and sea that lies between.
And, first to catch him and begin the game,
Did Ida fire her forest-pine, and, waving,
Handed him on to the Hermæan steep
Of Lemnos; Lemnos to the summit of
Zeus-consecrated Athos lifted; whence,
As by the giant taken, so despatcht,
The Torch of Conquest, traversing the wide
Ægæan with a sunbeam-stretching stride,
Struck up the drowsy watchers on Makistos;
Who, flashing back the challenge, flash'd it on
To those who watch'd on the Messapian height.
With whose quick-kindling heather heap'd and fired
The meteor-bearded messenger refresht,
Clearing Asopus at a bound, struck fire
From old Kithæron; and, so little tired
As waxing even wanton with the sport,
Over the sleeping water of Gorgopis
Sprung to the Rock of Corinth; thence to the cliffs
Which stare down the Saronic Gulf, that now
Began to shiver in the creeping Dawn;
Whence, for a moment on the neighbouring top
Of Arachnæum lighting, one last bound
Brought him to Agamemnon's battlements.

By such gigantic strides in such a Race
Where First and Last alike are Conquerors,
Posted the travelling Fire, whose Father-light
Ida conceived of burning Troy To-night.

CHORUS.

Woman, your words man-metal ring, and strike
Ev'n from the tuneless fibre of Old Age
Such martial unison as from the lips
Shall break into full Pæan by and by.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Aye, think—think—think, old man, and in your soul
As if 'twere mirror'd in your outward eye.
Imagine what wild work a-doing there—
In Troy—to-night—to-day—this moment—how
Harmoniously, as in one vessel meet
Esil and Oil, meet Triumph and Despair,
Sluiced by the sword along the reeking street,
On which the Gods look down from burning air.
Slain, slaying—dying, dead—about the dead
Fighting to die themselves—maidens and wives

Lockt by the locks, with their barbarian young,
And torn away to slavery and shame
By hands all reeking with their Champion's blood.
Until, with execution weary, we
Fling down our slaughter-satiated swords,
To gorge ourselves on the unfinisht feasts
Of poor old Priam and his sons; and then,
Roll'd on rich couches never spread for us,
Ev'n now our sleep-besotted foreheads turn
Up to the very Sun that rises here.
Such is the lawful game of those who win
Upon so just a quarrel—so long fought:
Provided always that, with jealous care,
Retaliation wreaking upon those
Who our insulted Gods upon them drew,
We push not Riot to *their* Altar-foot;
Remembering, on whichever mortal side
Engaged, the Gods are Gods in heav'n and earth,
And not to be insulted unaveng'd.
This let us take to heart, and keep in sight;
Lest, having run victoriously thus far,
And turn'd the very pillar of our race,
Before we reach the long'd-for goal of Home
Nemesis overtake, or trip us up;

Some ere safe shipp'd : or, launcht upon the foam,
Ere touch'd the threshold of their native shore ;
Yea, or that reach'd, the threshold of the door
Of their own home ; from whatsoever corner
The jealous Power is ever on the watch
To compass arrogant Prosperity.
These are a woman's words ; for men to take,
Or disregarded drop them, as they will ;
Enough for me, if having won the stake,
I pray the Gods with us to keep it still.

[*Exit* CLYTEMNESTRA.]

CHORUS.

Oh, sacred Night,
From whose unfathomable breast
Creative Order formed and saw
Chaos emerging into Law :
And now, committed with Eternal Right,
Who didst with star-entangled net invest
So close the guilty City as she slept,
That when the deadly fisher came to draw,
Not one of all the guilty fry through crept.

II.

Oh, Nemesis,
Night's daughter! in whose bosoming abyss
Secretly sitting by the Sinner's sleeve,
Thou didst with self-confusion counterweave
His plot; and when the fool his arrow sped,
Thine after-shot didst only not dismiss
Till certain not to miss the guilty head.

III.

Some think the Godhead, couching at his ease
Deep in the purple Heav'ns, serenely sees
Insult the altar of Eternal Right.
Fools! For though Fortune seem to misrequite,
And Retribution for awhile forget;
Sooner or later she reclaims the debt
With usury that triples the amount
Of Nemesis with running Time's account.

IV.

For soon or late sardonic Fate
With Man against himself conspires;
Puts on the mask of his desires:
Up the steps of Time elate

Leads him blinded with his pride,
And gathering as he goes along
The fuel of his suicide:
Until having topt the pyre
Which Destiny permits no higher,
Ambition sets himself on fire;
In conflagration like the crime
Conspicuous through the world and time
Down amidst his brazen walls
The accumulated Idol falls
To shapeless ashes; Demigod
Under the vulgar hoof down-trod
Whose neck he trod on; not an eye
To weep his fall, nor lip to sigh
For him a prayer; or, if there were,
No God to listen, or reply.

V.

And as the son his father's guilt may rue;
And, by retort of justice, what the son
Has sinn'd, to ruin on the father run;
So may the many help to pay the due
Of guilt, remotely implicate with one.

And as the tree 'neath which a felon cowers,
With all its branch is blasted by the bolt
Of Justice launch'd from Heav'n at *his* revolt;
Thus with old Priam, with his royal line,
Kindred and people; yea, the very towers
They crouch'd in, built by masonry divine.

VI.

Like a dream through sleep she glided
Through the silent city gate,
By a guilty Hermes guided
On the feather'd feet of Theft;
Leaving between those she left
And those she fled to lighted Discord,
Unextinguishable Hate;
Leaving him whom least she should,
Menelaus brave and good,
Scarce believing in the mutter'd
Rumour, in the worse than utter'd
Omen of the wailing maidens,
Of the shaken hoary head:
Of deserted board and bed.
For the phantom of the lost one
Haunts him in the wonted places;

Hall and Chamber, which he paces
Hither, Thither, listening, looking,
 Phantom-like himself alone;
Till he comes to loathe the faces
Of the marble mute Colossi,
 Godlike Forms, and half-divine,
 Founders of the Royal line,
Who with all unalter'd Quiet
 Witness all and make no sign.
But the silence of the chambers,
 And the shaken hoary head,
And the voices of the mourning
Women, and of ocean wailing,
Over which with unavailing
Arms he reaches, as to hail
The phantom of a flying sail—
 All but answer, Fled! fled! fled!
 False! dishonour'd! worse than dead!

VII.

At last the sun goes down along the bay,
And with him drags detested Day.
He sleeps; and, dream-like as she fled, beside
His pillow, Dream indeed, behold! his Bride

Once more in more than bridal beauty stands;
But, ever as he reaches forth his hands,
Slips from them back into the viewless deep,
On those soft silent wings that walk the ways of sleep.

VIII.

Not beside thee in the chamber,
Menelaus, any more;
But with him she fled with, pillow'd
On the summer softly-billow'd
Ocean, into dimple wreathing
Underneath a breeze of amber
Air that, as from Eros breathing,
Fill'd the sail and flew before;
Floating on the summer seas
Like some sweet Effigies
Of Eirene's self, or sweeter
Aphrodite, sweeter still:
With the Shepherd, from whose luckless
Hand upon the Phrygian hill,
Of the three Immortals, She

The fatal prize of Beauty bore,
Floating with him o'er the foam
She rose from, to the shepherd's home
On the Ionian shore.

IX.

Down from the City to the water-side
Old Priam, with his princely retinue.
By many a wondering Phrygian follow'd, drew
To welcome and bear in the Goddess-bride
Whom some propitious wind of Fortune blew
From whence they knew not o'er the waters wide
Among the Trojan people to abide
A pledge of Love and Joy for ever—Yes;
As one who drawing from the leopardess
Her suckling cub, and, fascinated by
The little Savage of the lustrous eye,
Bears home, for all to fondle and caress,
And be the very darling of the house
It makes a den of blood of by and by.

X.

For the wind, that amber blew,
Tempest in its bosom drew;

Soon began to hiss and roar;
And the sweet Effigies
That amber breeze and summer seas
Had wafted to the Ionian shore,
By swift metamorphosis
Turn'd into some hideous, hated,
Fury of Revenge, and fated
Hierophant of Nemesis;
Who, growing with the day and hour,
Grasp'd the wall, and topp'd the tower,
And, when the time came, by its throat
The victim City seized, and smote.

XI.

But now to be resolv'd, whether indeed
Those fires of Night spoke truly, or mistold
To cheat a doating woman; for, Behold,
Advancing from the shore with solemn speed,
A Herald from the Fleet, his footsteps roll'd
In dust, Haste's thirsty consort, but his brow
Check-shadow'd with the nodding Olive-bough;
Who shall interpret us the speechless sign
Of the fork'd tongue that preys upon the pine.

HERALD: CHORUS.

Oh, Fatherland of Argos, back to whom
After ten years do I indeed return
Under the dawn of this auspicious day!
Of all the parted anchors of lost Hope
That this, depended least on, yet should hold;
Amid so many men to me so dear
About me dying, yet myself exempt
Return to live what yet of life remains
Among my own; among my own at last
To share the blest communion of the Dead!
Oh, welcome, welcome, welcome once again
My own dear Country and the light she draws
From the benignant Heav'ns; and all the Gods
Who guard her; Zeus Protector first of all;
And Phœbus, by this all-restoring dawn
Who heals the wounds his arrows dealt so fast
Beside Scamander; and not last nor least
Among the Powers engaged upon our side,
Hermes, the Herald's Patron, and his Pride;
Who, having brought me safely through the war,
Now brings me back to tell the victory
Into my own belovèd country's ear;

Who, all the more by us, the more away,
Beloved, will greet with Welcome no less dear
This remnant of the unremorseful spear.
And, oh, you Temples, Palaces, and throned
Colossi, that affront the rising sun,
If ever yet, your marble foreheads now
Bathe in the splendour of returning Day
To welcome back your so long absent Lord;
Who by Zeus' self directed to the spot
Of Vengeance, and the special instrument
Of Retribution put into his hands,
Has undermined, uprooted, and destroy'd,
Till scarce one stone upon another stands,
The famous Citadel, that, deeply cast
For crime, has all the forfeit paid at last.

CHORUS.

Oh hail and welcome, Herald of good news!
Welcome and hail! and doubt not thy return
As dear to us as thee.

HERALD.

To me so dear,
After so long despaired of, that, for fear

Life's after-draught the present should belie,
One might implore the Gods ev'n now to die!

CHORUS.

Oh, your soul hunger'd after home!

HERALD.

So sore,
That sudden satisfaction of once more
Return weeps out its surfeit at my eyes.

CHORUS.

And our's, you see, contagiously, no less
The same long grief, and sudden joy, confess.

HERALD.

What! Argos for her missing children yearned
As they for her, then?

CHORUS.

Aye; perhaps and more,
Already pining with an inward sore.

HERALD.

How so?

CHORUS.

Nay, Silence, that has best endured
The pain, may best dismiss the memory.

HERALD.

Ev'n so. For who, unless the God himself,
Expects to live his life without a flaw?
Why, once begin to open that account,
Might not *we* tell for ten good years to come
Of all we suffer'd in the ten gone by?
Not the mere course and casualty of war,
Alarum, March, Battle, and such hard knocks
As foe with foe expects to give and take;
But all the complement of miseries
That go to swell a long campaign's account.
Cramm'd close aboard the ships, hard bed, hard board:
Or worse perhaps while foraging ashore
In winter time; when, if not from the walls,
Pelted from Heav'n by Day, to couch by Night

Between the falling dews and rising damps
That elf'd the locks, and set the body fast
With cramp and ague; or, to mend the matter,
Good mother Ida from her winter top
Flinging us down a coverlet of snow.
Or worst perhaps in Summer, toiling in
The bloody harvest-field of torrid sand,
When not an air stirr'd the fierce Asian noon,
And ev'n the sea sleep-sicken'd in his bed.
But why lament the Past, as past it is?
If idle for the Dead who feel no more,
Idler for us to whom this blissful Dawn
Shines doubly bright against the stormy Past;
Who, after such predicament and toil,
Boast, once more standing on our mother soil,
That Zeus, who sent us to revenge the crime
Upon the guilty people, now recalls
To hang their trophies on our temple walls
For monumental heir-looms to all time.

CHORUS.

Oh, but Old age, however slow to learn,
Not slow to learn, nor after you repeat,

Lesson so welcome, Herald of the Fleet!
But here is Clytemnestra; be you first
To bless her ears, as mine, with news so sweet.

CLYTEMNESTRA: HERALD: CHORUS.

I sang my Song of Triumph ere he came,
Alone I sang it while the City slept,
And these wise Senators, with winking eyes,
Look'd grave, and weigh'd mistrustfully my word,
As the light coinage of a woman's brain.
And so they went their way. But not the less
From those false fires I lit my altar up,
And, woman-wise, held on my song, until
The City taking up the note from me,
Scarce knowing why, about that altar flock'd,
Where, like the Priest of Victory, I stood,
Torch-handed, drenching in triumphant wine
The flame that from the smouldering incense rose.
Now what more needs? This Herald of the Day
Adds but another witness to the Night;
And I will hear no more from other lips,
Till from my husband Agamemnon all,

Whom with all honour I prepare to meet.
Oh, to a loyal woman what so sweet
As once more wide the gate of welcome fling
To the lov'd Husband whom the Gods once more
After long travail home triumphant bring;
Where he shall find her, as he left before,
Fixt like a trusty watchdog at the door,
Tractable him-ward, but inveterate
Against the doubtful stranger at the gate;
And not a seal within the house but still
Inviolate, under a woman's trust
Incapable of taint as gold of rust.

[*Exit* CLYTEMNESTRA.

HERALD: CHORUS.

A boast not misbeseeming a true woman.

CHORUS.

For then no boast at all. But she says well;
And Time interprets all. Enough for us
To praise the Gods for Agamemnon's safe,
And more than safe return. And Menelaus,
The other half of Argos—What of him?

HERALD.

Those that I most would gladden with good news,
And on a day like this—with fair but false
I dare not.

CHORUS.

What, must fair then needs be false?

HERALD.

Old man, the Gods grant somewhat, and withhold
As seems them good: a time there is for Praise,
A time for Supplication: nor is it well
To twit the celebration of their largess,
Reminding them of something they withhold.

CHORUS.

Yet till we know how much withheld or granted,
We know not how the balance to adjust
Of Supplication or of Praise.

HERALD.

Alas,
The Herald who returns with downcast eyes,

And leafless brow prophetic of Reverse,
Let him at once—at once let him, I say,
Lay the whole burden of Ill-tidings down
In the mid-market place. But why should one
Returning with the garland on his brow
Be stopt to name the single missing leaf
Of which the Gods have stinted us!

CHORUS.

Alas,
The putting of a fearful question by
Is but to ill conjecture worse reply!
You bring not back then—do not leave behind—
What Menelaus was?

HERALD.

The Gods forbid!
Safe shipp'd with all the host.

CHORUS.

Well but—how then?
Surely no tempest—

HERALD.

Ay ! by that one word
Hitting the centre of a boundless sorrow !

CHORUS.

Well, but if peradventure from the fleet
Parted—not lost ?

HERALD.

None but the eye of Day,
Now woke, knows all the havoc of the Night.
For Night it was ; all safe aboard—sail set,
And oars all beating home ; when suddenly,
As if those old antagonists had sworn
New strife between themselves for our destruction,
The sea, that tamely let us mount his back,
Began to roar and plunge under a lash
Of tempest from the thundering heavens so fierce
As, falling on our fluttering navy, some
Scatter'd, or whirl'd away like flakes of foam :
Or, huddling wave on wave, so ship on ship
Like fighting eagles on each other fell,

And beak, and wing, and claws, entangled, tore
To pieces one another, or dragg'd down.
So when at last the tardy-rising Sun
Survey'd, and show'd, the havoc Night had done,
We, whom some God—or Fortune's self, I think—
Seizing the helm, had steer'd as man could not,
Beheld the waste Ægæan wilderness
Strown with the shatter'd forest of the fleet,
Trunk, branch, and foliage; and yet worse, I ween,
The flower of Argos floating dead between.
Then we, scarce trusting in our own escape,
And saving such as yet had life to save,
Along the heaving wilderness of wave
Went ruminating, who of those we miss'd
Might yet survive, who lost: the saved no doubt,
As sadly speculating after us.
Of whom, if Menelaus—and the Sun,
(A prayer which all the Gods in Heav'n fulfil!)
Behold him on the water breathing still;
Doubt not that Zeus, under whose special showers
And suns the royal growth of Atreus' towers,
Will not let perish stem, and branch, and fruit,
By loss of one corroborating root.

CHORUS.

Oh, Helen, Helen, Helen! oh, fair name
And fatal, of the fatal-fairest dame
That ever blest or blinded human eyes!
Of mortal women Queen beyond compare,
As she whom the foam lifted to the skies
Is Queen of all who breathe immortal air!
Whoever, and from whatsoever wells
Of Divination, drew the syllables
By which we name thee; who shall ever dare
In after time the fatal name to wear,
Or would, to be so fatal, be so fair!
Whose dowry was a Husband's shame;
Whose nuptial torch was Troy in flame;
Whose bridal Chorus, groans and cries;
Whose banquet, brave men's obsequies;
Whose Hymenæal retinue,
The wingèd dogs of War that flew
Over lands and over seas,
Following the tainted breeze,
Till, Scamander reed among,
Their fiery breath and bloody tongue
The fatal quarry found and slew;

And, having done the work to which
The God himself halloo'd them, back
Return a maim'd and scatter'd pack.

II.

And he for whose especial cause
Zeus his wingèd instrument
With the lightning in his claws
From the throne of thunder sent:
He for whom the sword was drawn:
Mountain ashes fell'd and sawn;
And the armèd host of Hellas
Cramm'd within them, to discharge
On the shore to bleed at large;
He, in mid accomplishment
Of Justice, from his glory rent!
What ten years had hardly won,
In a single night undone;
And on earth what saved and gain'd,
By the raven sea distrain'd.

III.

Such is the sorrow of this royal house;
But none in all the City but forlorn

Under its own peculiar sorrow bows.
For the stern God who, deaf to human love,
 Grudges the least abridgment of the tale
Of human blood once pledg'd to him, above
The centre of the murder-dealing crowd
 Suspends in air his sanguinary scale;
And for the blooming Hero gone a-field
 Homeward remits a beggarly return
Of empty helmet, fallen sword and shield,
 And some light ashes in a little urn.

IV.

Then wild and high goes up the cry
To heav'n, "So true! so brave! so fair!
"The young colt of the flowing hair
"And flaming eye, and now—look there!
"Ashes and arms!" or, "Left behind
"Unburied, in the sun and wind
"To wither, or become the feast
"Of bird obscene, or unclean beast;
"The good, the brave, without a grave—
"All to redeem *her* from the shame
"To which she sold her self and name!"—

For such insinuation in the dark
About the City travels like a spark;
 Till the pent tempest into lightning breaks,
And takes the topmost pinnacle for mark.

V.

But avaunt all evil omen!
 Perish many, so the State
 They die for live inviolate;
Which, were all her mortal leafage
 In the blast of Ares scatter'd,
 So herself at heart unshatter'd,
In due season she retrieves
All her wasted wealth of leaves,
And age on age shall spread and rise
To cover earth and breathe the skies.
While the rival at her side
Who the wrath of Heav'n defied,
By the lashing blast, or flashing
Bolt of Heav'n comes thunder-crashing,
Top and lop, and trunk and bough,
Down, for ever down. And now,
He to whom the Zeus of Vengeance

Did commit the bolt of Fate—
Agamemnon—how shall I
With a Pæan not too high
For mortal glory, to provoke
From the Gods a counter-stroke,
Nor below desert so lofty,
Suitably felicitate?
Such as chasten'd Age for due
May give, and Manhood take for true.
For, as many men comply
From founts no deeper than the eye
With other's sorrows; many more,
With a Welcome from the lips,
That far the halting heart outstrips,
Fortune's Idol fall before.
Son of Atreus, I premise,
When at first the means and manhood
Of the cities thou didst stake
For a wanton woman's sake,
I might grudge the sacrifice;
But, the warfare once begun,
Hardly fought and hardly won,
Now from Glory's overflowing
Horn of Welcome all her glowing

Honours, and with uninvidious
Hand, before your advent throwing,
I salute, and bid thee welcome,
Son of Atreus, Agamemnon,
Zeus' revenging Right-hand, Lord
Of taken Troy and righted Greece :
Bid thee from the roving throne
Of War the reeking steed release ;
Leave the laurel'd ship to ride
Anchor'd in her country's side,
And resume the royal helm
Of thy long-abandon'd realm :
What about the State or Throne
Of good or evil since has grown,
Alter, cancel, or complete ;
And to well or evil-doer,
Even-handed Justice mete.

Enter AGAMEMNON *in his chariot,* CASSANDRA *following in another.*

AGAMEMNON.

First, as first due, my Country I salute,
And all her tutelary Gods; all those
Who, having sent me forth, now bring me back,
After full retribution wrought on those
Who retribution owed us, and the Gods
In full consistory determined; each,
With scarce a swerving eye to Mercy's side,
Dropping his vote into the urn of blood.
Caught and consuming in whose fiery wrath,
The stately City, from her panting ashes
Into the face of the revolted heavens
Gusts of expiring opulence puffs up.*
For which, I say, the Gods alone be thank'd;
By whose connivance round about the wall
We drew the belt of Ares, and laid bare

* Those who know the Greek will scarce accuse me of over-alliteration in this line, which runs in the original thus,

Spodos propempei pionas ploutou pnoas

The flank of Ilium to the Lion-horse,*
Who sprung by night over the city wall,
And foaled his iron progeny within,
About the setting of the Pleiades.†
Thus much by way of prelude to the Gods.
For you, oh white-hair'd senators of Argos,
Your measur'd Welcome I receive for just;
Aware on what a tickle base of fortune
The monument of human Glory stands;
And, for humane congratulation, knowing
How, smile as may the mask, the man behind
Frets at the fortune that degrades his own.
This, having heard of from the wise, myself,
From long experience in the ways of men,
Can vouch for—what a shadow of a shade
Is human loyalty; and, as a proof,
Of all the Host that filled the Grecian ship,

* Dr Donaldson tells us in his Varronianus, (says Paley) that the Lion was the symbol of the Atreidæ; and Pausanias writes that part of the ancient walls of Mycenæ was yet standing in his day, and Lions on the gate. Wordsworth's Athens says the Lion was often set up to commemorate a victory.

† "About the setting of the Pleiades," is about the end of Autumn.

And pour'd at large along the field of Troy,
One only Chief—and he, too, like yourself,
At first with little stomach for the cause—
The wise Odysseus—once in harness, he
With all his might pull'd in the yoke with me,
Through envy, obloquy, and opposition:
And in Odysseus' honour, live or dead—
For yet we know not which—shall this be said.
Of which enough. For other things of moment
To which you point, or human or divine,
We shall forthwith consider and adjudge
In seasonable council; what is well,
Or in our absence well deserving, well
Establish and requite; what not, redress
With salutary caution; or, if need,
With the sharp edge of Justice; and to health
Restore, and right, our ailing Commonwealth.
Now, first of all, by my own altar-hearth
To thank the Gods for my return, and pray
That Victory, which thus far by my side
Has flown with us, with us may still abide.

Enter CLYTEMNESTRA *from the Palace.*

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Oh Men of Argos, count it not a shame
If a fond wife, and one whom riper years
From Youth's becoming bashfulness excuse,
Dares own her love before the face of men;
Nor leaving it for others to enhance,
Simply declares the wretched widowhood
Which these ten years she has endured, since first
Her husband Agamemnon went to Troy.
'Tis no light matter, let me tell you, Sirs,
A woman left in charge of house and home—
And when that house and home a Kingdom—and
She left alone to rule it—and ten years!
Beside dissent and discontent at home,
Storm'd from abroad with contrary reports,
Now fair, now foul; but still as time wore on
Growing more desperate; as dangerous
Unto the widow'd kingdom as herself.
Why, had my husband there but half the wounds
Fame stabbed him with, he were before me now,
Not the whole man we see him, but a body
Gash'd into network; aye, or had he died

But half as often as Report gave out,
He would have needed thrice the cloak of earth
To cover him, that triple Geryon
Lies buried under in the world below.
Thus, back and forward baffled, and at last
So desperate—that, if I be here alive
To tell the tale, no thanks to me for that,
Whose hands had twisted round my neck the noose
Which others loosen'd—my Orestes too
In whose expanding manhood day by day
My Husband I perused—and, by the way,
Whom wonder not, my Lord, not seeing here;
My simple mother-love, and jealousy
Of civic treason—ever as you know,
Most apt to kindle when the lord away—
Having bestow'd him, out of danger's reach,
With Strophius of Phocis, wholly yours
Bound by the generous usages of war,
That make the once-won foe so fast a friend.
Thus, widow'd of my son as of his sire,
No wonder if I wept—not drops, but showers,
The ten years' night through which I watch'd in vain

The star that was to bring him back to me;
Or, if I slept, a sleep so thin as scared
Even at the slight incursion of the gnat;
And yet more thick with visionary terrors
Than thrice the waking while had occupied.
Well, I have borne all this: all this have borne,
Without a grudge against the wanderer,
Whose now return makes more than rich amends
For all ungrateful absence—Agamemnon,
My Lord and Husband; Lord of Argos; Troy's
Confounder; Mainstay of the realm of Greece;
And Master-column of the house of Atreus—
Oh wonder not if I accumulate
All honour and endearment on his head!
If to his country, how much more to me,
Welcome, as land to sailors long at sea,
Or water in the desert; whose return
Is fire to the forsaken winter-hearth;
Whose presence, like the rooted Household Tree
That, winter-dead so long, anew puts forth
To shield us from the Dogstar, what time Zeus
Wrings the tart vintage into blissful juice.
Down from the chariot thou standest in,
Crown'd with the flaming towers of Troy, descend,

And to this palace, rich indeed with thee,
But beggar-poor without, return! And ye,
My women, carpet all the way before,
From the triumphal carriage to the door,
With all the gold and purple in the chest
 Stor'd these ten years; and to what purpose stor'd,
 Unless to strow the footsteps of their Lord
Returning to his unexpected rest!

AGAMEMNON.

Daughter of Leda, Mistress of my house,
Beware lest loving Welcome of your Lord,
Measuring itself by his protracted absence,
Exceed the bound of rightful compliment,
And better left to other lips than yours.
Address me not, address me not, I say
With dust-adoring adulation, meeter
For some barbarian Despot from his slave;
Nor with invidious Purple strew my way,
Fit only for the footstep of a God
Lighting from Heav'n to earth. Let whoso will
Trample their glories underfoot, not I.
Woman, I charge you, honour me no more
Than as the man I am; if honour-worth,

Needing no other trapping but the fame
Of the good deed I clothe myself withal;
And knowing that, of all their gifts to man,
No greater gift than Self-sobriety
The Gods vouchsafe him in the race of life:
Which, after thus far running, if I reach
The goal in peace, it shall be well for me.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Why, how think you old Priam would have walk'd
Had he return'd to Troy your conqueror,
As you to Hellas his?

AGAMEMNON.

What then? Perhaps
Voluptuary Asiatic-like,
On gold and purple.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Well, and grudging this,
When all that out before your footstep flows
Ebbs back into the treasury again;
Think how much more, had Fate the tables turn'd,

Irrevocably from those coffers gone,
For those barbarian feet to walk upon,
To buy your ransom back?

AGAMEMNON.

Enough, enough!
I know my reason.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

What! the jealous God?
Or, peradventure, yet more envious Man?

AGAMEMNON.

And *that* of no small moment.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

No; the one
Sure proof of having won what others would.

AGAMEMNON.

No matter—Strife but ill becomes a woman.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

And frank submission to her simple wish
How well becomes the Soldier in his strength?

AGAMEMNON.

And I must then submit ?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Aye, Agamemnon,
Deny me not this first Desire on this
First Morning of your long-desired Return.

AGAMEMNON.

But not till I have put these sandals off,
That, slave-like, too officiously would pander
Between the purple and my dainty feet.
For fear, for fear indeed, some Jealous eye
From heav'n above, or earth below, should strike
The Man who walks the earth Immortal-like.
So much for that. For this same royal maid,
Cassandra, daughter of King Priamus,
And whom, as flower of all the spoil of Troy,
The host of Hellas dedicates to me;
Entreat her gently; knowing well that none
But submit hardly to a foreign yoke;
And those of Royal blood most hardly broke.
That if I sin thus trampling underfoot
A woof in which the Heav'ns themselves are dyed,

The jealous God may less resent his crime,
Who mingles human mercy with his pride.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

The Sea there is, and shall the sea be dried?
Fount inexhaustibler of purple grain
Than all the wardrobes of the world could drain;
And Earth there is, whose dusky closets hide
The precious metal wherewith not in vain
The Gods themselves this Royal house provide;
For what occasion worthier, or more meet,
Than now to carpet the victorious feet
Of Him who, thus far having done their will,
Shall now their last About-to-be fulfil.

[AGAMEMNON *descends fom his chariot, and goes with* CLYTEMNESTRA *into the house,* CASSANDRA *remaining.*]

CHORUS.

About the nations runs a saw,
That Over-good ill-fortune breeds;
And true that, by the mortal law,

Fortune her spoilt children feeds
To surfeit, such as sows the seeds
Of Insolence, that, as it grows,
The flower of Self-repentance blows.
And true that Virtue often leaves
The marble walls and roofs of kings,
And underneath the poor man's eaves
On smoky rafter folds her wings.

II.

Thus the famous city, flown
With insolence, and overgrown,
Is humbled: all her splendour blown
To smoke: her glory laid in dust;
Who shall say by doom unjust?
But should He to whom the wrong
Was done, and Zeus himself made strong
To do the vengeance He decreed—
At last returning with the meed
He wrought for—should the jealous Eye
That blights full-blown prosperity
Pursue him—then indeed, indeed,

Man should hoot and scare aloof
Good-fortune lighting on the roof;
Yea, even Virtue's self forsake
If Glory follow'd in the wake;
Seeing bravest, best, and wisest
But the playthings of a day,
Which a shadow can trip over,
And a breath can puff away.

CLYTEMNESTRA (*re-entering*).

Yet for a moment let me look on her—
This, then, is Priam's daughter—
Cassandra, and a Prophetess, whom Zeus
Has giv'n into my hands to minister
Among my slaves. Didst thou prophesy that?
Well—some more famous have so fall'n before—
Ev'n Herakles, the son of Zeus, they say
Was sold, and bow'd his shoulder to the yoke.

CHORUS.

And, if needs must a captive, better far
Of some old house that affluent Time himself

Has taught the measure of prosperity,
Than drunk with sudden superfluity.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Ev'n so. You hear? Therefore at once descend
From that triumphal chariot—And yet
She keeps her station still, her laurel on,
Disdaining to make answer.

CHORUS.

Nay, perhaps,
Like some stray swallow blown across the seas,
Interpreting no twitter but her own.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

But, if barbarian, still interpreting
The universal language of the hand.

CHORUS.

Which yet again she does not seem to see,
Staring before her with wide-open eyes
As in a trance.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Aye, aye, a prophetess—
Wench of Apollo once, and now—the King's!
A time will come for her. See you to it:
A greater business now is on my hands:
For lo! the fire of Sacrifice is lit,
And the grand victim by the altar stands.
[*Exit* CLYTEMNESTRA.

CHORUS (*continuing*).

Still a mutter'd and half-blind
Superstition haunts mankind,
That, by some divine decree
Yet by mortal undivin'd,
Mortal Fortune must not over-
Leap the bound he cannot see;
For that even wisest labour
Lofty-building, builds to fall,
Evermore a jealous neighbour
Undermining floor and wall.
So that on the smoothest water
Sailing, in a cloudless sky,
The wary merchant overboard
Flings something of his precious hoard

To pacify the jealous eye,
That will not suffer man to swell
Over human measure. Well,
As the Gods have order'd we
Must take—I know not—let it be.
But, by rule of retribution,
Hidden, too, from human eyes,
Fortune in her revolution,
If she fall, shall fall to rise:
And the hand of Zeus dispenses
Even measure in the main:
One short harvest recompenses
With a glut of golden grain;
So but men in patience wait
Fortune's counter-revolution
Axled on eternal Fate;
And the Sisters three that twine,
Cut not short the vital line;
For indeed the purple seed
Of life once shed—

CASSANDRA.

Phœbus Apollo!

CHORUS.

Hark!
The lips at last unlocking.

CASSANDRA.

Phœbus! Phœbus!

CHORUS.

Well, what of Phœbus, maiden? though a name
'Tis but disparagement to call upon
In misery.

CASSANDRA.

Apollo! Apollo! Again!
Oh, the burning arrow through the brain!
Phœbus Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS.

Seemingly
Possess'd indeed—whether by—

CASSANDRA.

Phœbus! Phœbus!
Thorough trampled ashes, blood, and fiery rain,

Over water seething, and behind the breathing
Warhorse in the darkness—till you rose again
Took the helm—took the rein—

CHORUS.

As one that half asleep at dawn recalls
A night of Horror!

CASSANDRA.

Hither, whither, Phœbus? And with whom,
Leading me, lighting me—

CHORUS.

I can answer that—

CASSANDRA.

Down to what slaughter-house!
Foh! the smell of carnage through the door
Scares me from it—drags me tow'rd it—
Phœbus! Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS.

One of the dismal prophet-pack, it seems,
That hunt the trail of blood. But here at fault—
This is no den of slaughter, but the house
Of Agamemnon.

CASSANDRA.

Down upon the towers
Phantoms of two mangled Children hover—and a famish'd man,
At an empty table glaring, seizes and devours!

CHORUS.

Thyestes and his children! Strange enough
For any maiden from abroad to know,
Or, knowing—

CASSANDRA.

And look! in the chamber below
The terrible Woman, listening, watching,
Under a mask, preparing the blow
In the fold of her robe—

CHORUS.

Nay, but again at fault:
For in the tragic story of this House—
Unless, indeed, the fatal Helen—
No woman—

CASSANDRA.

No Woman—Tisiphone! Daughter
Of Tartarus—love-grinning Woman above,
Dragon-tail'd under—honey-tongued, Harpy-claw'd,
Into the glittering meshes of slaughter
She wheedles, entices, him into the poisonous
Fold of the serpent—

CHORUS.

Peace, mad woman, peace!
Whose stony lips once open vomit out
Such uncouth horrors.

CASSANDRA.

I tell you the lioness
Slaughters the Lion asleep; and lifting

Her blood-dripping fangs buried deep in his mane,
Glaring about her insatiable, bellowing,
Bounds hither—Phœbus, Apollo, Apollo, Apollo!
Whither have you led me, under night alive with fire,
Through the trampled ashes of the city of my sire,
From my slaughtered kinsmen, fallen throne, insulted shrine,
Slave-like to be butcher'd, the daughter of a Royal line!

CHORUS.

And so returning, like a nightingale
Returning to the passionate note of woe
By which the silence first was broken!

CASSANDRA.

Oh,
A nightingale, a nightingale, indeed,
That, as she "Itys! Itys! Itys!" so
I "Helen! Helen! Helen!" having sung
Amid my people, now to those who flung
And trampled on the nest, and slew the young,

Keep crying "Blood! blood! blood!" and none will heed!
Now what for me is this prophetic weed,
And what for me is this immortal crown,
Who like a wild swan from Scamander's reed
Chaunting her death-song float Cocytus-down?
There let the fatal Leaves to perish lie!
To perish, or enrich some other brow
With that all-fatal gift of Prophecy
They palpitated under Him who now,
Checking his flaming chariot in mid sky,
With divine irony sees disadorn
The wretch his love has made the people's scorn,
The raving quean, the mountebank, the scold,
Who, wrapt up in the ruin she foretold
With those who would not listen, now descends
To that dark kingdom where his empire ends.

CHORUS.

Strange that Apollo should the laurel wreath
Of Prophecy he crown'd your head withal
Himself disgrace. But something have we heard
Of some divine revenge for slighted love.

CASSANDRA.

Aye—and as if in malice to attest
With one expiring beam of Second-sight
Wherewith his victim he has curs'd and blest,
Ere quencht for ever in descending night;
As from behind a veil no longer peeps
The Bride of Truth, nor from their hidden deeps
Darkle the waves of Prophecy, but run
Clear from the very fountain of the Sun.
Ye call'd—and rightly call'd me—bloodhound; ye
That like old lagging dogs in self-despite
Must follow up the scent with me; with me,
Who having smelt the blood about this house
Already spilt, now bark of more to be.
For, though you hear them not, the infernal Choir
Whose dread antiphony forswears the lyre,
Who now are chaunting of that grim carouse
Of blood with which the children fed their Sire,
Shall never from their dreadful chorus stop
Till all be counter-pledg'd to the last drop.

CHORUS.

Hinting at what indeed has long been done,

And widely spoken, no Apollo needs;
And for what else you aim at—still in dark
And mystic language—

CASSANDRA.

Nay, then, in the speech,
She that reproved me was so glib to teach—
Before yon Sun a hand's-breadth in the skies
He moves in shall have moved, those age-sick eyes
Shall open wide on Agamemnon slain
Before your very feet. Now, speak I plain?

CHORUS.

Blasphemer, hush!

CASSANDRA.

Aye, hush the mouth you may,
But not the murder.

CHORUS.

Murder! But the Gods—

CASSANDRA.

The Gods!
Who now abet the bloody work within!

CHORUS.

Woman!—The Gods!—Abet with whom?—

CASSANDRA.

With Her,
Who brandishing aloft the axe of doom,
That just has laid one victim at her feet,
Looks round her for that other, without whom
The banquet of revenge were incomplete.
Yet ere I fall will I prelude the strain
Of Triumph, that in full I shall repeat
When, looking from the twilight Underland,
I welcome Her as she descends amain,
Gash'd like myself, but by a dearer hand.
For that old murder'd Lion with me slain,
Rolling an awful eyeball through the gloom
He stalks about of Hades up to Day,
Shall rouse the whelp of exile far away,

His only authentic offspring, ere the grim
Wolf crept between his Lioness and him;
Who, with one stroke of Retribution, her
Who did the deed, and her adulterer,
Shall drive to hell; and then, himself pursued
By the wing'd Furies of his Mother's blood,
Shall drag about the yoke of Madness, till
Releas'd, when Nemesis has gorg'd her fill,
By that same God, in whose prophetic ray
Viewing To-morrow mirror'd as To-day,
And that this House of Atreus the same wine
Themselves must drink they brew'd for me and mine;
I close my lips for ever with one prayer,
That the dark Warder of the World below
Would ope the portal at a single blow.

CHORUS.

And the raving voice, that rose
 Out of silence into speech
 Out-ascending human reach,
Back to silence foams and blows,
 Leaving all my bosom heaving—
Wrath and raving all, one knows;

Prophet-seeming, but if ever
Of the Prophet-God possest,
By the Prophet's self confest
God-abandon'd—woman's shrill
Anguish into tempest rising,
Louder as less listen'd.
Still—
Spite of Reason, spite of Will,
What unwelcome, what unholy,
Vapour of prognostic, slowly
Rising from the central soul's
Recesses, all in darkness rolls?
What! shall Age's torpid ashes
Kindle at the ransom spark
Of a raving maiden?—Hark!
What was that behind the wall?
A heavy blow—a groan—a fall—
Some one crying—Listen further—
Hark again then, crying "Murder!"
Some one—who then? Agamemnon?
Agamemnon?—Hark again!
Murder! murder! murder! murder!
Help within there! Help without there!
Break the doors in!—

CLYTEMNESTRA.

(*Appearing from within, where lies* AGAMEMNON *dead.*)*

Spare your pain.
Look! I who but just now before you all
Boasted of loyal wedlock unashamed,
Now unashamed dare boast the contrary.
Why, how else should one compass the defeat
Of him who underhand contrives one's own,
Unless by such a snare of circumstance
As, once enmesht, he never should break through?
The blow now struck was not the random blow
Of sudden passion, but with slow device
Prepared, and levell'd with the hand of time.
I say it who devised it; I who did;
And now stand here to face the consequence.
Aye, in a deadlier web than of that loom
In whose blood-purple he divined his doom,
And fear'd to walk upon, but walk'd at last,
Entangling him inextricably fast,
I smote him, and he bellow'd; and again
I smote, and with a groan his knees gave way;

* Hermann says, "Tractis tabulatis"—the scene *drawing*—"conspicitur Clytemnestra in conclavi stans ad corpus Agamemnonis."

And, as he fell before me, with a third
And last libation from the deadly mace
I pledg'd the crowning draught to Hades due,
That subterranean Saviour—of the Dead!*
At which he spouted up the Ghost in such
A burst of purple as, bespatter'd with,
No less did I rejoice than the green ear
Rejoices in the largess of the skies
That fleeting Iris follows as it flies.

CHORUS.

Oh woman, woman, woman!
By what accursèd root or weed
Of Earth, or Sea, or Hell, inflamed,
Dar'st stand before us unashamed
And, daring do, dare glory in the deed!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Oh, I that dream'd the fall of Troy, as you
Belike of Troy's destroyer. Dream or not,
Here lies your King—my Husband—Agamemnon,
Slain by this right hand's righteous handicraft.

* At certain Ceremonies, the Third and crowning Libation was to *Zeus* Sotēr; and thus ironically to Pluto.

Like you, or like it not, alike to me;
To me alike whether or not you share
In making due libation over this
Great Sacrifice—if ever due, from him
Who, having charg'd so deep a bowl of blood,
Himself is forced to drink it to the dregs.

CHORUS.

Woman, what blood but that of Troy, which Zeus
Foredoom'd for expiation by his hand
For whom the penalty was pledg'd? And now,
Over his murder'd body, Thou
Talk of libation!—Thou! Thou! Thou!
But mark! Not thine of sacred wine
Over his head, but ours on thine
Of curse, and groan, and torn-up stone,
To slay or storm thee from the gate,
The City's curse, the People's hate,
Execrate, exterminate—

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Aye, aye, to me how lightly you adjudge
Exile or death, and never had a word

Of counter-condemnation for Him there;
Who, when the field throve with the proper flock
For Sacrifice, forsooth let be the beast,
And with his own hand his own innocent
Blood, and the darling passion of my womb—
Her slew—to lull a peevish wind of Thrace.
And him who curs'd the city with that crime
You hail with acclamation; but on me,
Who only do the work you should have done,
You turn the axe of condemnation. Well;
Threaten you me, I take the challenge up;
Here stand we face to face; win Thou the game,
And take the stake you aim at; but if I—
Then, by the Godhead that for me decides,
Another lesson you shall learn, though late.

CHORUS.

Man-mettled evermore, and now
Manslaughter-madden'd! Shameless brow!
But do you think us deaf and blind
Not to know, and long ago,
What Passion under all the prate
Of holy justice made thee hate
Where Love was due, and love where—

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Nay, then, hear!
By this dead Husband, and the reconciled
Avenging Fury of my slaughter'd child,
I swear I will not reign the slave of fear
While he that holds me, as I hold him, dear,
Kindles his fire upon this hearth: my fast
Shield for the time to come, as of the past.
Yonder lies he that in the honey'd arms
Of his Chryseides under Troy walls
Dishonour'd mine: and this last laurell'd wench,
This prophet-messmate of the rower's bench,
Thus far in triumph his, with him along
Shall go, together chaunting one death-song
To Hades—fitting garnish for the feast
Which Fate's avenging hand through mine has drest.

CHORUS.

Woe, woe, woe, woe!
That death as sudden as the blow
That laid Thee low would me lay low
Where low thou liest, my sovereign Lord!

Who ten years long to Trojan sword
Devoted, and to storm aboard,
In one ill woman's cause accurst,
Liest slain before thy palace door
By one accursedest and worst!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Call not on Death, old man, that call'd or no,
Comes quick; nor spend your ebbing breath on me,
Nor Helena: who but as arrows be
Shot by the hidden hand behind the bow.

CHORUS.

Alas, alas! The Curse I know
That round the House of Atreus clings,
About the roof, about the walls,
Shrouds it with his sable wings;
And still as each new victim falls,
And gorg'd with kingly gore,
Down on the bleeding carcase flings,
And croaks for "More, more, more!"

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Aye, now, indeed, you harp on likelier strings.
Not I, nor Helen, but that terrible
Alastor of old Tantalus in Hell;
Who, one sole actor in the scene begun
By him, and carried down from sire to son,
The mask of Victim and Avenger shifts:
And, for a last catastrophe, that grim
Guest of the abominable banquet lifts
His head from Hell, and in my person cries
For one full-grown sufficient sacrifice,
Requital of the feast prepared for him
Of his own flesh and blood—And there it lies.

CHORUS.

Oh, Agamemnon! Oh, my Lord!
Who, after ten years toil'd;
After barbarian lance and sword
Encounter'd, fought, and foil'd;
Returning with the just award
Of Glory, thus inglorious by
Thine own domestic Altar die,

Fast in the spider meshes coil'd
Of Treason most abhorr'd!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

And by what retribution more complete,
Than, having in the meshes of deceit
Enticed my child, and slain her like a fawn
Upon the altar; to that altar drawn
Himself, like an unconscious beast, full-fed
With Conquest, and the garland on his head,
Is slain; and now, gone down among the Ghost,
Of taken Troy indeed may make the most,
But not *one* unrequited murder boast.

CHORUS.

Oh Agamemnon, dead, dead, dead, dead, dead!
What hand, what pious hand shall wash the wound
Through which the sacred spirit ebb'd and fled!
With reverend care compose, and to the ground
Commit the mangled form of Majesty,
And pour the due libation o'er the mound!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

This hand, that struck the guilty life away,
The guiltless carcase in the dust shall lay
With due solemnities: and if with no
Mock tears, or howling counterfeit of woe,
On this side earth; perhaps the innocent thing,
Whom with paternal love he sent before,
Meeting him by the melancholy shore,
Her arms about him with a kiss shall fling,
And lead him to his shadowy throne below.

CHORUS.

Alas! alas! the fatal rent
Which through the house of Atreus went,
Gapes again; a purple rain
Sweats the marble floor, and falls
From the tottering roof and walls,
The Dæmon heaving under; gone
The master-prop they rested on:
And the storm once more awake
Of Nemesis; of Nemesis
Whose fury who shall slake!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Ev'n I; who by this last grand victim hope
The Pyramid of Vengeance so to cope,
That—and methinks I hear him in the deep
 Beneath us growling tow'rd his rest—the stern
 Alastor to some other roof may turn,
Leaving us here at last in peace to keep
What of life's harvest yet remains to reap.

CHORUS.

Thou to talk of reaping Peace
Who sowest Murder! Woman, cease!
And, despite that iron face—
Iron as the bloody mace
Thou bearest—boasting as if Vengeance
 Centred in that hand alone;
Know that, Fury pledg'd to Fury,
Vengeance owes himself the debts
He makes, and while he serves thee, whets
 His knife upon another stone,
Against thyself, and him with thee
Colleaguing, as you boast to be,
The tools of Fate. But Fate is Zeus;

Zeus—who for awhile permitting
Sin to prosper in his name,
Shall vindicate his own abuse;
And having brought his secret thought
To light, shall break and fling to shame
The baser tools with which he wrought.

ÆGISTHUS: CLYTEMNESTRA: CHORUS.

All hail, thou daybreak of my just revenge!
In which, as waking from injurious sleep,
Methinks I recognize the Gods enthroned
In the bright conclave of eternal Justice,
Revindicate the wrongs of man to man!
For see *this* man—so dear to me now dead—
Caught in the very meshes of the snare
By which his father Atreus netted mine.
For that same Atreus surely, was it not?
Who, when the question came of, Whose the throne?
From Argos out his younger brother drove,
My sire—Thyestes—drove him like a wolf,
Keeping his cubs—save one—to better purpose.
For when at last the home-heartbroken man
Crept humbly back again, craving no more

Of his own country than to walk its soil
In liberty, and of her fruits as much
As not to starve withal—the savage King,
With damnable alacrity of hate,
And reconciliation of revenge,
Bade him, all smiles, to supper—such a supper,
Where the prime dainty was—my brother's flesh,
So maim'd and clipt of human likelihood,
That the unspecting Father, light of heart,
And quick of appetite, at once fell to,
And ate—ate—what, with savage irony
As soon as eaten, told—the wretched man
Disgorging with a shriek, down to the ground
The table with its curst utensil dashed,
And, grinding into pieces with his heel,
Cried, loud enongh for Heav'n and Hell to hear,
"Thus perish all the race of Pleisthenes!"
And now behold! the son of that same Atreus
By me the son of that Thyestes slain
Whom the kind brother, sparing from the cook,
Had with his victim pack'd to banishment;
Where Nemesis—(so sinners from some nook,
Whence least they think assailable, assailed)—
Rear'd me from infancy till fully grown,

To claim in full my father's bloody due.
Aye, I it was—none other—far away
Who spun the thread, which gathering day by day
Mesh after mesh, inch upon inch, at last
Reach'd him, and wound about him, as he lay,
And in the supper of his smoking Troy
Devour'd his own destruction—scarce condign
Return for that his Father forc'd on mine.

CHORUS.

Ægisthus, only creatures of base breed
Insult the fallen; fall'n too, as you boast,
By one who plann'd but dared not do the deed.
This is your hour of triumph. But take heed;
The blood of Atreus is not all outrun
With this slain King, but flowing in a son,
Who saved by such an exile as your own
For such a counter-retribution—

ÆGISTHUS.

Oh,
You then, the nether benchers of the realm,
Dare open tongue on those who rule the helm?

Take heed yourselves; for, old and dull of wit,
And harden'd as your mouth against the bit,
Be wise in time; kick not against the spurs;
Remembering Princes are shrewd taskmasters.

CHORUS.

Beware thyself, bewaring me;
Remembering that, too sharply stirred,
The spurrer need beware the spurred;
As thou of me; whose single word
Shall rouse the City—yea, the very
 Stones you walk upon, in thunder
Gathering o'er your head, to bury
 Thee and thine Adultress under!

ÆGISTHUS.

Raven, that with croaking jaws
 Unorphean, undivine,
After you no City draws;
 And if any vengeance, mine
Upon your wither'd shoulders

CHORUS.

Thine!
Who daring not to strike the blow
Thy worse than woman-craft design'd,
To worse than woman—

ÆGISTHUS.

Soldiers, ho!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Softly, good Ægisthus, softly; let the sword that has so deep
Drunk of righteous Retribution now within the scabbard sleep!
And if Nemesis be sated with the blood already spilt,
Even so let us, nor carry lawful Justice into Guilt.
Sheath your sword; dismiss your spears; and you, Old men, your howling cease,
And, ere ill blood come to running, each unto his home in peace,

Recognizing what is done for done indeed, as done it is,
And husbanding your scanty breath to pray that nothing more amiss.
Farewell. Meanwhile, you and I, Ægisthus, shall deliberate,
When the storm is blowing over, how to settle House and State.




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